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Are you keeping up with the kids?

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Abstract

Today's students are changing the ways they communicate, so school counsellors need to change with them. New technologies are providing exciting possibilities to complement existing face-to-face counselling to provide options for helping young people. There are inherent benefits associated with the new technology and counselling, however, there are also limitations. More research is needed to provide evidence of the effectiveness of school online counselling. In addition, ethical and legal issues need to keep pace with the developing technologies.

Technology is how kids communicate

Personal computers and the Internet are becoming increasingly available in schools and in the homes of students (Guanipa, 2001; Martin, 2003). Children and adolescents have been quick to immerse themselves in these technologies with large numbers of young people already using the Internet to communicate with others (Rosenbaum et al., 2000). In Australia in 2004, a survey by iTouch found that 50, 000 children aged between 5 and 9 years of age owned a mobile phone, one third of children aged 10 to 13-years old and 45% of 13 to 15-year-olds also owned the device (Allison, 2004).

However, many kids don't seek help with problems

There is stigma in help-seeking behaviour in general in Australia (Jorm, 2000) and this is thought to be even more so for adolescents (Frydenberg & Lewis, 2000). Rickwood (1995) found approximately half of a sample of Australian secondary school students did not ask for help with their 'psychological' problems. In addition, almost one third of high school students in another Australian study, also reported that they had not sought any help for either a major problem (where the problem was serious, of an intimate nature and due to factors beyond their control) or a minor problem in the previous 6 months (Fallon & Bowles, 1999).

The percentage of youth who are unwilling to seek help in the nonclinical population increases as mental health problems increase (Carlton & Deane, 2000; Deane, Wilson & Ciarrochi, 2001). Sawyer et al. (2001) found that 38% of adolescents with mental health issues indicated that they did not want any kind of help. In addition 14% of young people reported they were concerned about what other people would think if they sought help. Adolescents who are poor at identifying, describing and managing their emotions (emotional competence) have the lowest intentions to seek help (Ciarrochi, Wilson, Deane, & Rickwood, 2003). Wilson and Deane (2001) suggest that the cognitive distortions accompanying excessive anxiety and depression (such

as rumination and overgeneralisation) might in fact act as added barriers to appropriate help-seeking.

Furthermore, adolescent boys seek help less often than girls (Rickwood, 1995; Tishby et al., 2001). Fallon and Bowles (1999) found that while 23% of girls did not seek help with a problem, this percentage increased to 38% for boys. It is interesting to note that there were no significant age trends in help-seeking behaviour, which the authors suggest could be construed that patterns of help-seeking behaviour have already been established for these adolescents by the time they begin secondary school. This has implications for providing programs and intervention in the primary school. One of the barriers to help-seeking in young males has been associated with aversive emotions (Wilson & Deane, 2001). A survey of young male callers by Kids Help Line in 2002 found that although nearly half (49%) wanted to discuss their emotional experiences, more often they were concerned that people would react negatively and they would be judged as crazy or uncool. Additionally, they were afraid of being seen as weak and therefore concerned about being teased. Further, they reported being afraid of losing control over their emotions (Kids Help Line, 2003c).

Another barrier to help-seeking behaviour in school situations could be the lack of anonymity for students in accessing the school counsellor, sometimes caused by the placing of the counsellor's room in the administration block. In addition, students need to be excused from classes to see the counsellor. Perhaps, with the rapid expansion of technology, school counsellors have an opportunity to engage reluctant students, especially boys, with services that are delivered other than by traditional face-to-face counselling. After family doctors, school-based counsellors provide the service most frequently used by children and adolescents with mental health concerns (Sawyer et al., 2001). School counsellors are therefore in an important position to assist young people with mental health concerns, especially to engage them by their preferred method of communication.

Why isn't this happening?

There are many school counsellors who are reluctant to fully engage with the new technology. Owen and Weikel (1999) found school counsellors were only moderately confident in their use of computers with some authors speculating that the personality types who are attracted to school counselling are wary of technology (Myrick & Sabella, 1995). They describe themselves as "people people" or "not technically minded." Othman (2000) in an exploratory study indicated that school counsellors were unready and unprepared to use the Internet to conduct online counselling sessions. Another difficulty therapeutically can be the issue of a perceived lack of control by counsellors in the therapeutic relationship conducted online. As Wright (2002) argues this is because online work subverts traditional power relationships between counsellors and clients. School counsellors might be even more susceptible to the loss of this traditional power relationship than others because of the additional adult-child relationship already existing within the therapeutic relationship and the school.

However, there are also instances where school counsellors embrace new technology, such as those who participated in innovative email supervision (McMahon, 2001). Others have participated in email discussion groups (Rust, 1995), and use the Internet for resources for students for providing information, especially career information and analysing assessments (Guillot-Miller & Partin, 2003). School counsellors also are using the Internet for their own information, for professional development accessing websites, online journals and newsletters (Myrick & Sabella, 1995). In addition, some school counsellors are also using the Internet to communicate effectively with diverse and troubled students (Guanipa, 2001).

Another major difficulty that faces school counsellors at the moment is the lack of training in counselling with the new technologies. This applies both to the courses of preparation for school counsellors as well as professional development for practising school counsellors, so that they are able to overcome the difficulties of the lack of visual and auditory communication clues online. However, QGCA is working to provide a professional development package available online to address this issue.

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Therapeutic Issues

Often counsellors are concerned (as are some clients) that the lack of nonverbal messages will hinder the counselling therapeutic process and will fundamentally undermine any good a counselling relationship is able to achieve. The absence of clues of voice tone, body language, expression and eye contact seem fundamental to the practice of traditional counselling. However, counsellors are researching how to convey these emotional clues in text-based messages.

One of the skills for asynchronous text-only communication developed by Mitchell and Murphy (Collie, Mitchell, & Murphy, 2001), is emotional bracketing. This technique is used to facilitate more emotional material being expressed in writing. Both counsellor and client are invited to place important emotional content in square brackets, together with their thoughts. For example,

I have rewritten this sentence three times now [feeling pretty frustrated] to make sure the readers [am wondering if anyone reads Connections online articles] understand what Mitchell and Murphy mean [I feel pleased – I think I've done it].

Descriptive immediacy is writing as much as possible about the immediate emotion (Collie et al., 2001). For example,

I'm really worried that school counselors might not like this paper. If you were here with me, you would see me slumped in my chair, sighing and biting the end of my pen. I can feel my facial muscles tightening, especially around my ears and of course my frown lines are deepening. Why am I so dependent on other people's opinion?

There are also conventions which people use in text-based messages outside of therapy such as the size of the font, capitals for emphasis or SHOUTING, punctuation marks such as :) for happy. Mitchell suggests that interpretations can be made by the appearance of the email in the same way that a first impression of a person is made. Emoticons, semi-pictorial symbols for specific emotions, reactions or facial expressions, acronyms, changes in fonts and other techniques specific to online communication help increase understanding (Wright, 2002).

Moreover, KHL has developed interactive visual tools to enhance their online counselling service (KHL, 2003c). These tools, developed in conjunction with Queensland University of Technology's Creative Industries Faculty, provide more ways for young people to express themselves by showing their emotions rather than limiting their exchanges to describing their feelings in words. A counsellor can present to the client a set of icons or 'emoticons' (coloured jewels) representing the most common emotions and a sliding scale from 1 to 10 to rate the intensity or frequency of their feelings. This gives added emotional expression to facilitate greater understanding similar to Murphy and Mitchell's (1998) emotional bracketing.

In addition, an audiographic telecommunication system that supports counselling by speech and sharable computer drawings which can be used with standard home computers is being developed with adults (Collie, Cubranic, & Long, 2002). The system supports five tasks of speaking within the group, drawing, passing drawings, maintaining awareness of other group members' activities and showing drawings to the other group members. The authors suggest that adolescents who might be averse to face-to-face counselling are candidates for this mode of counselling delivery. Video-conferencing of course almost eliminates the lack of metacommunication.

Ethical issues

Another concern for school counsellors is ethical issues; that is, will the students be properly cared for when engaging in online counselling? There are issues of confidentiality, is it safe to talk? Email can be intercepted and unless the website is secure then, confidentiality cannot be ensured. However, messages can either be encrypted or password protected. Furthermore, it is very easy for the client to terminate counselling. However, this is a similar problem to phone counselling which could also be overcome by asking the student for a phone number to call or SMS, or an address for an emergency. Additionally, because of the anonymity of the client there can be issues with informed consent if the client is a minor. There are however, professional associations, which have written ethical guidelines, such as the American Psychological Association (2003) and the Australian Psychological

Society (1999) which can assist school counsellors. In some ways, ethical issues do not change with different mediums. However, there are also gaps and unexamined issues in different mediums especially when information and communication technology is becoming increasingly more complex and constantly changing. Ethical guidelines need to keep pace and be constantly updated.

Legal issues

A further concern for school counsellors is 'what if something goes wrong?' As members of a school community, school counsellors have a duty of care to the students. In an emergency situation, contact may need to be made with police or ambulance or a child welfare agency. However, it may not be possible to assist an anonymous client in locating support services (Robson, 2000). For KHL in 2002 there were 6% of calls where help could not be given either because of the client terminating or that there was no appropriate service available in their area (Kids Help Line, 2003b). This needs to be weighed against the potential likelihood of the client not accessing help at all.

Lack of evidence that online counselling is effective

To date the research on the effectiveness of online counselling is limited in scope and breadth. Research with online counselling and adolescents is even scarcer, while online counselling by school counsellors is almost non-existent. Some researchers contend that as online relationships are different from face-to-face counselling relationships, no better or no worse, then comparing them is misguided (Anthony, 2000). However, research at least confirming that online counselling does no harm is needed. This can reliably studied by comparing the results of the same type of program or counselling conducted in both mediums. A few case studies have shown the benefits of email therapy with a socially isolated 15-year-old boy and a 17-year-old female with anorexia nervosa (Bailey, Yager, & Jenson, 2002).

Some research comparing the effectiveness of online counselling with face-to-face has shown no difference in effectiveness between the modalities. For example, Cohen and Kerr (1998) compared the impact of computer assisted and face-to-face techniques on client's level of anxiety and attitudes towards counselling and found no significant difference. Zimmerman (1987) investigated the differences between computer-mediated and face-to-face interactions among emotionally disturbed adolescents. He found that computer-mediated communication was more expressive of feelings and made more frequent mention of interpersonal issues.

A recent study linked clinicians from the Kansas Medical Centre with students in a primary school diagnosed with depression (Nelson, Barnard, & Cain, 2003). Twenty-eight children with an average age of 10 years 3 months were randomly divided into two groups. One group received 8 weekly cognitive-behavioural sessions for depression face-to-face with a therapist. The other group received the same program by videoconferencing. Both groups showed decreased symptoms. In addition, the videoconferencing participants reported

a high level of satisfaction with the service. However, the rapid development of providing psychological services online is far outstripping research and evaluation. Even though technology is changing quickly, research needs to keep up with the provision of different services.

Why it should happen

One of the main benefits that has been claimed for online counselling is the anonymity of the client. There are some research studies which address how the anonymity of Internet communications affects the quality of relationships formed online (Lea & Spears, 1995). Anonymity may make communication through the Internet easier for young people who are socially awkward but nonetheless eager to connect to others (Wolak, Mitchell, & Finkelhor, 2002). KHL (2003d) reported that many young people say they would never have sought help if online counselling was not available. Further, it has been reported that the issues that they discuss on line are more severe and complex concerns of child abuse, suicide and mental health problems. The students reported that deeply personal issues and difficult and sensitive topics are easier to write than talk about (Kids Help Line, 2003c). Even compared to those young people who rang Kids Help Line, those who accessed online counselling were three times more likely in 2002, to seek help for eating behaviours, mental health, suicide and emotional and behaviour management, sexual assault and self image. This could be explained by Huang and Alessi's (1996) finding that relationships formed on line seem to be less inhibited, leading to faster intimate disclosures and frank, authentic responses.

In addition, online counselling is less intrusive for young people who are often reluctant to seek help as they feel they might lose control of their emotions. Boys, who often fall into this category, seem to appreciate the less intrusive nature afforded online. A survey of young male callers by Kids Help Line in 2002 found that although nearly half (49%) wanted to discuss their emotional experiences more often, they were concerned that people would react negatively and they would be judged as crazy or uncool. Additionally, they were afraid of being seen as weak and therefore concerned about being teased. Using computers may be particularly empowering for people who feel intimidated initially and adolescents who are familiar with technology and are averse to face-to-face counselling could benefit by cybercounselling (Collie et al., 2002).

There is also less stigmatism associated with online counselling, as no one knows if the student is accessing help. This is in direct contrast to most school counselling situations where students must get passes to be out of class to access the counsellor. This is closely allied with the privacy online counselling affords, especially to boys who feel they might not be able to contain their emotions and embarrass themselves face-to-face. This is part of the client having more control and the levelling of power differences between counsellor and client on line (Murphy & Mitchell, 1998).

Online counselling also has the advantage of more flexibility. Instead of students missing classes, they can access the school counsellor at other times. Online counselling also means that there is a permanent record of the sessions. The records from email exchanges can be beneficial for a client to chart their progress, for counsellor training, supervision and research (Oravec, 2000).

In addition, KHL cannot provide online services to all the young people who are currently trying to access them (Kids Help Line, 2003d). Feedback from online clients, while acknowledging their satisfaction with the quality of the counselling, are dissatisfied with the accessibility to the services and the delays in response. This is in spite of expansion by around 30% each year for the last 4 years. In 2003 there was an 80% increase in the number of webcounselling sessions and a 50% increase in counselling emails. School counsellors need to meet some of this demand. Furthermore, from a school perspective the advantage over a national helpline is that the counsellor is able to support within the student's community and offer face to face counselling if trust is built over time. As Sampson and Kolodinsky (1997) suggest, after becoming more secure in the counselling relationship the client may be willing to meet in person. Adolescents already meet in person with each other after chatting online, especially if the new friend lives in the vicinity (Wolak et al., 2002). Further, the school counsellor, being in the same area as the student, can offer further help and support by knowing and accessing local services within the student's own community, which is difficult to do for a national helpline.

School counsellors do not have to limit their counselling to only online. As Harun, Sainudin & Hamzah (2001) found in their study, while 52% of students from a private Malaysian college were willing to participate in e-counselling sessions, 42% were unsure, with the remainder totally rejecting the idea. One 17 year-old student commented to the school counsellor that email contact was OK but he felt that face-to-face was also required for a 'real' relationship (Campbell & Gardner, 2003).

There are exciting possibilities for using the Internet in distance education, especially in Australia, where in Queensland there are 7 schools of distance education. Other countries such as Canada, which are also responsible for delivering educational services to rural and remote students, could also use online counselling as a viable option (Collie, Cubranic, & Long, 2002).

Conclusion

The idea of providing counselling services via the internet is becoming a more accepted mode of support. For example, a quick search of the net will reveal a number of agencies and commercial organisations that are now offering this service. If a student can access the school counsellor via a synchronous mechanism such as a chat room, students especially boys, may be more willing to seek help. Online counselling is already being used; Kids Help Line provides web counselling to supplement their national telephone counselling

service. In addition there are many benefits of providing online counselling through the school website.

For more information watch the DVD Talk-2-Me online at www.agca.com.au
Go to link of Mind Matters Plus
Spot one of the authors!!

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